Press the past forward button

Shahid Amin

The writing of the nation's history for schoolchildren has seen much turbulence over the years. Finally, however, we seem to have got right with a perceptive and mature historiography for the young

IT WAS two years ago that a new curriculum for our school children set out by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was hotly debated in this and other national dailies, academics, MPs and members of civil society had weighed in with their tears and apprehensions of the novel and the new. Trajectories of deviations and parabola of descent from an earlier set standard were traced. To forsake the nationalist certitudes about our past, it was said, was to push, our children into the lap of parochial, pedagogic anarchy. Well, since then a half dozen innovative, student-friendly and fetchingly illustrated history books have been devised and published. These take the children of Class 9 to Class 12 riding piggy back through social and historical time of both world and Indian history. Early medieval, pre-modern and modern pasts are thematically surveyed and questions asked. All these culminating in our recent present i.e. the time of the framing of the Indian constitution – the template of our democratic society – within which we tend to fight for our individual and community rights while encountering the nation as a living organism.

Mid-August 2007 is a good time to reflect on the convergences and divergences between table thumping and market-savvy celebrations of 60 years of Independence by the political and the media classes, and what the new school books offer by way of 600 years of Indian History. State commemorations, as witnessed on May 11 (the day that Delhi fell back to Indians 150 years ago) tend often towards the farcically spectacular. On such occasions official *sutradhars* turn their faces away from the complex weave of the fabric of history electing instead to hang the 'National Tale' by the slender thread of *tamasha* creating effects. And so it was that on May 11 this year Bahadur Shah Zafar made a second appearance This time as an oversized real puppet reclining with his hookah on the *faseel* (parapet) of the Red Fort, stirring gently to the pull of celebratory strings -- in the cause of the 'Ghadar' and now in the service of the nation. As I write, 11 hours before the midnight of August 15. 2007, the media have already begun their high-pitched celebrations.

Part of this feverish pitch, no doubt, has to do with the energies of the young. Some would argue that the mounting of nationalist spectacles in this year of jubilee celebrations is a necessary exercise, aimed at catching the attention of our youth, who now constitute a very large proportion of Indian population. Governments have always focused on drilling nationalist feelings into school-goers. And this in the worthy cause of making them into ideal future citizens. Whether it was getting up early in a sleepy town on the morning of August 15 for a pre-dawn *prabhat-pheri* or committing the red-letter dates of nationalist calendar to memory in the name of history, the aim in both cases was to instill a sense of nationalism. Why one approached the physics or the mathematics class as disciplines with their own order of proof as refutability, history by contrast, was a lesson to learn by heart, and that too at the altar of nationalism and the Nation-State.

It is remarkable that the three NCERT textbooks Class 12 history are called Themes in Indian History and not the usual triptych of ‘Ancient', 'Medieval' and 'Modern' Indian history. Further, there is no attempt to let loose a connected chronology from the Indus Valley to say the Indo-Pak Indus Waters Treaty of 1960’s. Instead, themes such as 'Kinship, Caste and Class' 600 BC – 600 AD as gleaned from the mammoth and malleable epic, the *Mahabharata* to the perception of Indian society (10^{th}-17^{th} Century) through the eyes of travelers are dealt within an eye-and-attention catching body of texts and illustrations. The colonial segment does not start with the usual battle of Plassey but by exploring the official rural archives which the colonial State built to better facilitate its understanding the taxation of the countryside.

The chapter on 1857 focuses not just on the world of many protagonists - famous little-known, unknown and infamous. It turns to the representation of that revolt in the victor’s paintings and photographs. The failure of the great rebellion has left us with an archive of the dominant images of a resurgent colonialism, through which we access, perforce, the events of those tumultuous times. The chapter on Gandhi, engages both with the making of the Mahatma and studies it close, with varied documents, the making of the 1930-32 Civil Disobedience Movement. And in a perceptive daring and brilliantly executed move the coming Independence is not excised from, but rather elaborated through an understanding of the politics, memories and experiences of Partition. For if truth be told Partition didn't just accompany Independence, for millions Independence was Partition.

On August 15, 1947, Gandhi did not participate in any of the Independence Day celebrations. He was busy ministering to his bloody countrymen in the riot torn city of Calcutta. For a school-leaving history text book to engage perceptively with the visceral and the long life of Partition is to honour that powerful gesture of the Mahatma. It is to critique – respectfully, no doubt - the 60th anniversary of just Independence, and nothing else. It is also to signal that history-writing in post-colonial India has come of age

Shahid Amin is Professor of History University of Delhi